

VZCZCXRO6292  
OO RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHRN  
DE RUEHMR #0371/01 1771710  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
O 261710Z JUN 07  
FM AMEMBASSY MASERU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3096  
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY  
RUEHMR/AMEMBASSY MASERU 3468

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MASERU 000371

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/S, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [LT](#)

SUBJECT: LESOTHO: EMBATTLED RADIO PRESENTER FACES SEDITION CHARGES

REF: A) MASERU 359; B) MASERU 339

MASERU 00000371 001.2 OF 002

(U) SUMMARY: The Lesotho Mounted Police Force's (LMPS) detention and release on bail of radio presenter Thabo Thakalekoala is the latest chapter in the Government of Lesotho's tense relationship with pro-opposition radio station Harvest FM. Authorities detained Thakalekoala for questioning on June 22 and charged him with high treason on June 24 for an on air reading of a letter allegedly from unidentified renegade soldiers involved in recent attacks on GOL ministers. Although the charges have been reduced to sedition and he has been released on bail, the GOL's case has been criticized by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and Reporters Without Borders. Of note, the Department recently accepted Thakalekoala into the "Radio Broadcasting" International Visitor's Leadership Program, slated to begin in July. END SUMMARY.

-----  
A Tense Time for Lesotho's Private Media  
-----

¶2. (U) On June 22, the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) of the Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS) took Harvest FM radio presenter and freelance journalist Thabo Thakalekoala into custody for questioning. Thakalekoala is freelance journalist and Regional Chairperson of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA). He is also a correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).

¶3. (U) The CID detained Thakalekoala immediately after he read on air a letter allegedly written by unidentified renegade members of the Lesotho Defense Forces (LDF) which denounced Prime Minister Phakalita Mosisili as "the unwanted ruler of Lesotho." The letter, broadcast on the early morning talk show "Rise and Shine," included accusations of corruption involving Lesotho's ruling elite (ref A).

¶4. (U) While in custody, police demanded that Thakalekoala reveal the names of the people who gave him the letter. Officials from the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) who visited Thakalekoala on June 22 quoted him as telling police that he was not obligated as a journalist to reveal his sources. Later that day, he told colleagues from Harvest FM that he would hold a hunger strike until his release. After being held for 48 hours, prosecutors charged him with high treason on grounds that the letter read on air was an attempt to incite the Lesotho army to revolt. On June 25, the prosecutors lowered the charge against Thakalekoala to sedition under Section 7D of the 1984 Internal Security Act. The LMPS then released Thakalekoala

on bail of 1,000 Maluti (approximately USD \$140). The Maseru Chief Magistrate Molefi Makara ordered Thakalekoala not to comment publicly on his case. As a condition of his bail, Thakalekoala must report to the police every Friday until July 25, when his trial date will be set.

-----  
Negative Reaction  
-----

15. (U) The local and international media communities have expressed concern over the treatment of Thakalekoala, and MISA Lesotho Deputy Chairperson Thabo Motlamelle publicly labeled the charges "overkill." Crowds gathered outside the police station in protest over the weekend, according to local press reports. An estimated 1,000 people gathered outside the court on June 25 as Thakalekoala was released on bail. On June 26, Reporters Without Borders issued a public statement calling on the GOL to drop all charges against Thakalekoala.

-----  
GOL vs. Harvest  
-----

16. (U) This case is the latest round of a long running bout between the Government of Lesotho and Harvest FM. Lesotho's immigration authorities deported to South Africa a previous presenter at the station, Reverend Adam Lekhoaba, after February's general elections on the grounds that he was present illegally in Lesotho allegedly as a citizen of South Africa. During the same time period, Lesotho's Ministry of Communications turned off the station's transmitters for a day without explanation. More recently, the GOL denied the station use of a public venue for an anniversary celebration event, though this move was quickly overturned by Lesotho's High Court

MASERU 00000371 002.2 OF 002

(ref B).

-----  
Rebel with a Cause?  
-----

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Weighing the news value of the "LDF Renegade Letter" against its potential harmful impact on public safety poses an interesting ethical question in Lesotho, but it does appear that the GOL's treatment of Thakalekoala will only gain unwanted negative attention. Thakalekoala has strong connections with news organizations with global reach, such as the BBC and SABC, and his story with no doubt gain international sympathy. The GOL's handling of Thakalekoala, in the context of its past actions against Harvest FM, seems to show that the GOL is still grappling with the difficult issues posed by a vociferous free press during times of political crisis.

18. (SBU) Of note, several months ago Embassy Maseru and the Department selected Thakalekoala as a respected and credible local journalist for participation in the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). His program, "Radio Broadcasting," will run from July 15-27, 2007. END COMMENT.  
MURPHY